Discovering Homelessness: Teaching, Scholarship, and the Real World

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by

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Whether the causes have been war, famine, poverty, natural disaster, or more complicated contemporary reasons, homelessness has perpetuated through the span of time. As the social sciences emerged, the field of sociology carved a niche that allowed for social behaviors, especially those that are problematic within society, to become focal points of study. The school with which the emergence of academic sociology in the US is most tied, the University of Chicago, drew scholars who believed that the challenge of solving these social problems should dominate the agenda of the discipline.

Ernest W. Burgess, one of the pioneers of modern sociology, provides us with a model of what members of the academy can offer the community. He was a faculty member at the University of Chicago, a social activist who taught, wrote about, and participated in the social events of his community. During the early years of the 20th Century, he was the chair of the Chicago society for the reduction of homelessness. His scholarship and that of his graduate students reflected dilemmas in the real world. For Burgess and most of his contemporaries, the door always was open between the classroom and the real world. While the Natural Science

laboratories were behind the walls of the university, Sociology's laboratory was outside, in the real world, where common everyday people lived common everyday lives. This thrust guided the academic endeavor of most earlier students of sociology ... they engaged with that world located outside of the classroom.

I firmly subscribe to the idea that sociology and sociologists should be about using academic skills to invent things in the real world that ultimately have the potential of producing a better place for each of us and for the next generations to live.

For decades sociologists have struggled to explain to others what they do - how they go about doing their work, and how to know its value. I have engaged this struggle while trying to put into words those early mornings when I went with my students into the often dark recesses of alleyways, bridges, wooded hillsides, and other spaces where homeless people moved with invisibility; while trying to provide government mandated counts of an uncountable population, and while trying to bring to light the issue of rural homelessness. Tonight I will try to bring into focus the ways in which teaching, scholarship, and the community, "as the laboratory for the sociologist and student," have intersected in my work and --- in my life.

I believe the story for tonight starts in the spring of 1988 when I received a grant under the McKinney Act to "count" Iowa's homeless. Iowa Department of Education personnel who administered the funds were interested in getting some handle on the population of homeless children in rural Iowa. Human service advocates, while maintaining that there

were homeless people in small towns and nearby areas, had not resolved the problem of how to enumerate them. In rural America there were few emergency shelters, no deteriorating hotels catering to homeless persons, no sidewalk grates where they could gather, and most of all there was a denial that homelessness could exist in locales where "people take care of their own."

Four able undergraduate assistants worked with me in developing strategies for researching this relatively undefined phenomenon in locales where it remained unacknowledged. We quickly developed, and tried to operationalize, categories of homelessness. Next, "informed authorities," people who worked daily "in the trenches" were brought to our campus. Here they were quizzed about their definitions of homelessness, the magnitude of the problem, and such things as "how we would know one if we saw one." From this we developed six unique categories of homelessness: on the street, quasi homeless, sheltered, transitional, doubling up, and near homeless.

At this early point of the process, we were forced to recognize the political implications of our research. Many wished to confine the definition of homeless to "on the street" while others wanted to recognize all who lacked adequate housing. The conservative would deny services to all but those who could pass a narrow litmus test while the liberal wanted to help everyone. The inclusion of "doubling up" as a category of homelessness was most controversial. Taking care of your neighbors and relatives was the "Iowa" and "Christian" thing to do. Thus people forced to live with others to survive were anything but homeless, at least that was

the presentation. To challenge such an assertion was tantamount to heresy.

During that summer the students traveled in teams of two to all ninety-nine counties of the State, interviewing officials and advocates. They asked about numbers of homeless, community resources for the homeless and perceptions of causation. During that summer, we all learned more about perceptions and definitions than we did about numbers.

The student researchers gathered a lot of data, but most of all gained a better understanding of how local communities dealt with those who were being defined in contemporary terminology as homeless. Most of those they interviewed insisted that there were no homeless in their town; one social service director held to this claim even as he pointed to a passing automobile, filled to the roof with personal belongings (or as the homeless say, "stuff") and explained that since the couple lived in the car they really were not homeless. That was simply their choice, a bad choice, but one that they should "live with." In another county a respondent talked about two elderly men who lived in a corn crib, but insisted that they were just too damn stubborn to accept their social security entitlements ... therefore they were not homeless - they just made bad personal choices. The concept of bad choices, bad people, and bad luck quickly emerged as the dominant definition of the cause of homelessness in rural Iowa.

The attribution of blame quickly emerged as a focus of our research. Attribution of blame was first and foremost personalized ... people made bad choices and the only way to solve the problem of homelessness was for

people to simply start making good choices. Our research showed that the less densely settled the county, the greater the probability that social service and educational workers would place responsibility for homelessness on the individual. In addition, we discovered a gender difference; women were likely to attribute responsibility to social or global factors while men focused on individual characteristics of the homeless ... they were lazy, shiftless, taking advantage of others, and deserved nothing from anyone. One departure from this generalization was that men employed in social service agencies, such as the Community Action Program, General Relief, or Human Services viewed the problem as having systemic origins and thus broadly-based public policy solutions.

With the aid of some statistical projections, we derived the first estimate of the number of homeless in the State. When the final total button was pushed the number was 14,111 ... approximately one-half of one percent of the state population. In Des Moines the number was approximately 2,000 ... just over one-half of one percent of the SMA. In the City of Des Moines an average 200 people lived "on the street." Another 200 "quasi homeless" lived in abandoned houses, tents, or automobiles. Approximately 900 persons lived in shelters, and those remaining were "doubling up."

The political implications of doing research on the homeless suddenly became even clearer. One Saturday morning a bold headline on the top of the front page of the Des Moines *Register* proclaimed, "14,111 Iowans Homeless." Reaction was swift--the Executive Office of the State of Iowa "froze" the study and ordered that the Department of Education not provide for its circulation. Three months later, after the Governor

appointed a new Chief of Staff, and the study was actually read, it was decided that there was considerable validity associated with the work and the study was released.

The study engendered other reactions, particularly from counties in which a relatively high proportion of residents had been found to be homeless. Officials in these counties began to challenge the research. After the publication of one report, I met with the director of general relief in a northeastern Iowa county. She demanded to know with whom we had talked (clearly ready to see that they lost their jobs). She was unable to understand why, ethically, that information could not be provided. She stated "There are no homeless in my county unless I say there are." Talk about social construction of reality and recasting history ... she had fine-tuned the art.

Caller after caller from another county in eastern Iowa demanded that I come to their county and show them the homeless. They explained that this negative publicity about their county would ruin their tourist industry, focused on the "Field of Dreams." They were convinced that "now that they had built it, no one would come" if homeless were thought to be living in their community. But, when quizzed by a national reporter from the *Wall Street Journal* they admitted the numbers were correct.

This relatively formal research project was the first of the many ways in which teaching and research came together with community involvement. Engaging students in the research illustrated quickly how even the most mundane statistic can have social meaning when people whose life it

impacts are known. All of this led to the next stage of my pathway through the study and experiences of homelessness.

-- PAUSE --

It was on a warm June morning in 1989 that I embarked on one of the most intense teaching/learning experiences of my life, as I went out to interact with some of those whom we had counted. I did not set out to invent an activity to complement student growth as they explored the social sciences any more than Timothy McVey set out to be an antihero of American legend. I imagine the journey just took each of us, like Topsy, to a point where we suddenly realized that what we were doing was taking on meaning beyond the immediacy of our personal lives. C. Wright Mills taught us about how personal biography is shaped by, and at the same time shapes, the social worlds in which we live. It is those personal experiences that lead us to recognize the divergence between the world in which we live and that in which we thought we lived.

The Salvation Army "breakfast program," the vehicle I later used to introduce students to the street, started in recognition of the need for an outreach activity to "help" the homeless population of Des Moines. The local Sally, for which I served as board chair, was searching for an outreach to bring that organization more in step with contemporary needs. After scratching our heads during several meetings we decided to go to the streets.

The Salvation Army emergency vehicle, maintained for use during those very rare disasters ... floods, tornadoes, train wrecks, and fires, sat idle in a garage over 90% of the time. We visualized taking this oversized

yellow van with its built-in generator, coffee makers, and stoves onto the streets of the city each Tuesday morning to provide a warm meal for the homeless, especially the children we knew resided in abandoned houses and under some of the more protected bridges of the city.

It took a while to make these intentions a reality ... lawyers fretted about liability; budget people wondered aloud where to get money for gasoline, maintenance, and food; outreach workers asked how we were going to get volunteers to help us; and most of us questioned our ability to make the program work during the harsh winter months. Finally, we took to the streets with little understanding of what we were doing.

Within a few weeks the program was established. Street people and residents of homeless shelters came to expect the emergency vehicle to be at a certain corner at a given time. Several minutes before our arrival at shelters such as the YWCA, which served no meals to its resident homeless women and children, lines started to form.

Soon, a second smaller van was added and went off in search of the street people who moved from bridge to bridge, abandoned house to abandoned house, tent location to tent location. We were learning through trial and error what to expect; we had no blueprint. For training we relied on limited experience with an outreach van that had worked the streets on Saturday nights for about a year. It was with the director of that program that I first talked with street people, entered and crawled through my first abandoned house, walked inside my first crack house, went under most of the major bridges in the city, and tromped through wooded areas and

along riverbanks of the two large tributaries that met just below downtown.

Folk wisdom and impressionistic evidence guided us during the first few weeks that we were on the street. Media accounts led us to expect that we would be hassled, panhandled, conned, and should be watchful lest someone mug us. Soon we realized that the opposite was closer to true. Homeless persons whom we met in these remote corners of the community were friendly, inviting, talkative, sharing, and open. At the same time they were not about to let down their guards. They had become accustomed to encounters with people like us who sought personal affirmation for outreach work. While we visited, these people were front stage in the truest Goffman sense. They had learned to protect their personal identities from those who crawled through a window or came down a riverbank and invaded their space.

Within a few weeks the many men and a few women took on names, personalities, selves ... there were lives behind these faces that wore the marks of weather and age. Their look, walk, and talk were far different than what I had expected. I tried to tell my story to students in class and to friends at social gatherings. It just didn't work. People offered praise and told me that I had courage and the sprit of a modern day missionary, going out among the homeless. What a depressing response - they were missing the message, the excitement of testing the reality of the world with knowledge of experience, culture, and the written word. I now knew that sitting with a person under a bridge or in the woods near the river bank, sharing a cup of coffee, and talking about their lives, at least that part that

they were willing to share, brought the opportunity for understanding what those who had never been there could not share. I did not know the words that would give us some common basis for talking.

[Pause]

It took four or five people to staff the emergency vehicle ... coordinate preparation and dispense food to the lines of people, ensure that no clutter was left behind, and clean up the van after the morning's effort. It had become clear that preparing and delivering breakfast to the homeless required regular volunteers. Thus, began the intersection of my teaching life with the activities that already dominated my research and voluntarism.

Students with whom I had tried to share the Tuesday morning experiences asked to go with us. They returned to class and debated whether these personal experiences supported or refuted what they had read in books, articles and newspapers, seen on television, or discussed in class. The experiences gave substance to their opinions, allowing them to offer validation, to veto, or claim a need for more research to resolve the controversies that they had now discovered surrounded homeless persons. I came to realize that the knowledge they derived from their experience with homelessness would impact their lives more strongly than would any class. They would relate stories of going under a bridge or into an abandoned house over and over all of their lives. The stories we bring to front are often the "I have a better experience to tell you about than you have to tell me about" ... and this would provide some real grist for such tales and a positive basis for later voluntarism.

In order to academically integrate these activities, I started to relate the street experience to a research requirement, culminating in a paper. I understood that not all students would benefit by the street experience, some were afraid while others had ideological difficulties with what we were trying to do. These students pursued more traditional research projects.

The merging of the street experience with the academic became even more pronounced during the summer when I began to teach one-credit courses that met three hours per day for one week. These courses that most often focused on issues of poverty and homelessness, provided a unique opportunity for merging classroom and service learning. Students had the option to go on the Salvation Army breakfast program, participate in the satellite program, meet and talk with homeless men, women, and children, and write a paper about those experiences. In addition they were required to report their observations to the class where they responded to and were critiqued by other students, many of whom have shared these or similar experiences.

Many students emerged from the community laboratory with a new sense of social responsibility or with a commitment to research. While teaching one of these 1-credit homeless classes during the early 1990s, I had been blasting the down-right mean-spiritedness of the Reagan administration. Some students grimaced, rolled their eyes; one broke a pencil. Finally, a woman stopped me with both hands waving above her head and said,

> "I demand five minutes to present counter information to the class! Those people are homeless because they are shiftless and lazy ... they don't have a reason to get a job."

I disagreed and suggested that she accompany the morning program the following week, and that we could talk as she met the homeless. She went with me the following Tuesday morning, and every Tuesday morning thereafter for several years. For two years she and I led the satellite wagon and ventured into every abandoned house in the city, into the woods or jungle, found homeless in caves, tents, and the state fair grounds. She served as research assistant for the 1992 Iowa Homeless study, and went on to lead the flood effort for the Salvation Army following the disastrous 1993 Midwest flood.

Soon the breakfast program was highlighted in the local newspapers, television, and radio stations. After all, the Salvation Army shield, bridges, and abandoned houses do make good photo opportunities. This publicity prompted some local high school and middle school teachers to ask if their students could accompany us on Tuesday mornings. The answer was yes, but we limited participation as there was a number, a critical mass, above which we felt we would become intrusive.

We never surveyed the students or their sponsors, so we can offer no beta scores, no chi squares, no path model, no regression matrix to measures the impact of the experience. But we listened to their words, observed the expressions on their faces and the simple ways in which common, everyday, people met those who lived on the streets.

In the early morning we often did see the residuals of the previous night: spent needles, empty Night Train or Mad Dog 20/20 bottles, and traces of a different life-style. We saw plywood over the windows and doors of abandoned houses, sometimes pushed aside so a street person could catch a few hours of sleep out of the cruel elements of a January night in Iowa. What we more often saw was the residual of the violence of poverty, the violence of the powerful as they constrained the disenfranchised.

We almost never saw the violence of the homeless toward outsiders. Now and then we would be told to "get the hell out of here, this is my place" ... we would leave immediately, for they were correct, we were the outsiders. In all that time we saw not one gun, knife, or weapon nor did we hear a voice raised in anger except from some City of Des Moines officials who told us that we were enabling rather than helping homeless people.

About two years after our first Tuesday we expanded our outreach to include Friday morning. The intent was to serve near-homeless persons whose needs had not been addressed by the original program. The near-homeless population was defined as persons who, without entitlements, would be homeless within a month. While, not a very "scientific" definition, anyone who deals with poverty populations understands exactly what is meant by that phrase.

This expansion opened up more opportunities for my students and other volunteers. Students who wanted to do more than provide a meal and a friendly ear once a week enrolled in a more formalized internship.

They began to work directly with organizers in developing goals, objectives and procedural documents, coordinating volunteers, soliciting food and other items to be dispensed to the homeless, contacting referral agencies (drug, alcohol, shelters, etc.) to which those who were in need could be taken for services and support. In turn, the students kept journals in which their communications, observations, interpretations, and understanding of barriers and assets were recorded and discussed. They prepared annotated bibliographies, met regularly with social service personnel and with me, then came together with other interns in similar placements to share their experiences and tie them to classroom.

[A Bag of Stories to Tell]

Being on the street with students and among the homeless for five years, I developed a bag full of stories about homeless people and about those who take the time to meet and get to know them on their own turf. Only a few of these stories are about women, since few women live on the streets of Des Moines. Over the five years we probably encountered only a half dozen adult women and perhaps fifteen, teenage girls, a few of those with their mothers. Most of the stories were about young men grown old.

{Tramp Training]

One story unfolded on a warm July morning. Several members of the men's basketball team had remained on campus to take summer classes and some of them were in my mini - course. When we worked our way under the University Avenue bridge that spans the Des Moines River, we looked up to that flat concrete landing just below the structure that holds up the pavement where so many homeless sleep at night. Coming down

the steep grade that led toward the river was a young man, perhaps 25 years of age. His hair was unkempt and his clothes were in need of a washing, but he was bouncy and happy. We met Rick each week, always at different locations. This day, in a voice echoing with happiness, he asked ... "What do we have here?" ... as he looked upward from his just over five-foot stature toward these men who probably averaged 6′ 8″ ... I replied that they were my students and they were out to understand more about living under bridges and being homeless. He said that he would teach them ... "I'm a tramp and I will teach you how to be a tramp if you will give me your time," Rick shouted, "yes, I will be your trainer I will do 'tramp training.'" And with that my students, mostly from the inner cities of large metropolitan communities, walked up and sat in his open-air home on the slabs of concrete, drinking coffee, eating stale donuts, and talking about being a tramp. I don't know for sure how academically credible the experience was, but I do know that the encounter had a life-long effect on the life of each man, including Rick. They will never forget each other. Two of these men today are outreach workers in an early intervention program that is designed to keep young people off of the streets.

[On the Streets in the Winter]

As we drove to the major bridge in the Southeast part of the city we had difficulty driving through the two feet of recently fallen snow. The plows had not fully cleared the roadway and we looked from our vehicle down the pathway to where homeless people typically live, hoping to see nothing and move on to what would eventually be a warm breakfast. Instead there were distinct recesses in the pathway denoting footprints,

now a few hours old. We followed the prints to the "camping" area, some one hundred yards to the North. There we found a small, heavy-set, man the locals called "Shorty." Shorty had been a back-up cook at Sally until mid-November, at which time he took to the street on the fourth anniversary of the death of his son and wife. Rumor had it that they were killed by a drunken driver. With time people came to suspect and eventually realize that Shorty was that driver. The guilt ate him alive and on that anniversary he abandoned Sally and took to the street.

We found Shorty sitting on a wooden crate with another box to his front, on which were three bottles of MD/20/20 – two filled and one about half empty. He wore gloves, but his fingers were exposed through well-worn holes. He had planned, he told us, to drink until he could sleep and hopefully sleep into eternity. We were able to immediately contact an outreach program at the local public hospital and they quickly sent their outreach van and emergency crew to the bridge where they were able to talk Shorty off of the street and into treatment. Shorty had suffered frost-bite on his hands, face, and toes ... eventually he lost two joints on his right hand and two toes ... one on each foot. Students, upon critiquing our experiences, commented more than once on how guilt, personal troubles, and problems with substances impact greatly on the daily lives of homeless people. C. Wright Mills' written words had now taken on a practical meaning that was in the past only an abstract set of ideas.

[Living With Mental Illness]

I met Everett the other day. Howard, his closest friend recently died but Everett remains the same today as he was one decade ago when I first got to

know him. Everett had been diagnosed as a schizophrenic, having endured catatonic states during several earlier periods of his life. He resided in an old house that lacked utilities. Every room of the house was stacked with throwaway materials that Everett had, over the years, picked up during his roaming and dumpster-diving. Everett, now in his early forties, had worked at various jobs but was no longer able to hold permanent employment. The house in which he resided had belonged to his parents, and when they died it became his property. But he lacked the skills to maintain the residence and it had deteriorated slowly to a state of disrepair and would eventually be condemned and demolished by the city.

I considered it especially important for students to spend as much time as possible with Everett and to do so inside his residence where they saw, the circumstances of his day-to-day life – including decaying food and sometimes large rats darting from one place of hiding. An outreach worker and I became concerned when we discovered that Everett had found an old open-fronted gas heater and was burning wood as well as paper in its hollow inside. He had constructed some venting, but we were fearful that the trash piled around the burner might ignite and cause a major fire. In addition, Everett was now self-medicating. He had been taking Lithium for some time, but had decided to sell it on the street and self-medicate with alcohol. The outreach worker and I went to his house daily as the late November days became short and bitterly cold.

Students spent considerable time with Everett talking about his past, his daily activities, those things that he held to be important and unimportant in his life. This provided a good opportunity for students to practice life-history research, biographic accounts, and other techniques of qualitative data-finding whereby they could act as validators of what the other had heard and recorded.

The experiences with Everett, and many others with whom students came into contact, provided the opportunity to better understand the difficulties of collecting valid and reliable data in field situations.

[Face to Face with the Homeless]

One of the most challenging parts of meeting homeless people over a prolonged period of time is that you come to know them as human beings. They face many of the same difficulties as do the rest of us. The faces that come and go are varied, usually men who are down and out. They live on the margins of society, finding support among others who have a life style similar to their own.

We discovered that homeless people make innovative use of discarded items. So it is with pallets, the wooden frames on which products are stacked so they can easily be moved by machine to store aisles. These wooden pallets, often discarded into heaps behind warehouses or in fields, provide the building materials for shacks. Dave built a shack, perhaps six by eight feet wide, and seven feet high. It had a window and a front door facing a pot-belly stove that had been salvaged from a nearby junk yard. The stove was some two feet from the door and on cold nights additional pallet slats were used to fuel a roaring fire that warmed the makeshift structure. Students came to meet with Dave two or three times per week and worked on a life-history of his earlier years. They had planned on finishing their project in a few weeks.

Dave had been in the military, the students later reported, and had served time in Vietnam but would never talk about what he had experienced during that encounter. He had a family, somewhere in

Tennessee, and planned on “getting dry” and going to school and getting a good job, perhaps returning to his roots. Dave was a “canner” who worked hard collecting discarded cans and daily returned them to stores for the five-cent rebate that each provided. Now and then, when available, he took a day job within the subrosa economy. At night he would enjoy a hearty dinner at a mission and then work his way back home, stopping to buy a bottle or two, even three if the funds were rich. Once home he was willing to share his bottle with any friend who happened by. It was not unusual for him to drink himself into a deep sleep. One typical night, with the fire roaring in the stove, he fell asleep.

It was reported that his friends tried to rescue him when they discovered his home engulfed in flames, but they were too late. They said they had been awakened by screams from inside the structure but by the time anyone tried to rescue Dave the fire was too intense and the screams had stopped. The students were shocked, never having imagined that such a thing could happen to someone they knew and whose life they had vicariously shared. We drove out to the camp and found only ashes now outlining the rectangle where Dave's home once stood. In a few days a strong storm dropped several inches of rain, after which only the barest hint of Dave's home remained.

A few of the students said in hindsight that they should have done something, warned Dave of the potential fire, for it had been obvious to them. Others blamed his lack of concern with his own safety. Wherever the blame was placed, they acknowledged having shared in a life and took pride in being able to preserve it in the biography they were writing.

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There are many reasons why a person spends time under a bridge or in an abandoned house. Some are there to escape a society that has been overly harsh. A few are running from something... violence, the police, parents, a spouse, life. Still others come because there is no other place to go. Some are young, as was one sixteen year-old who had run away from a violent home and had no safe place to turn. Some are looking for closeness, as was a woman in her mid forties who stayed there because her "meat" was spending time under a bridge and she would do anything to be with him. Still others are running from families that do not understand their personal, sexual or cultural life-style or reject it on the basis of religious belief. This was the case of one young man who was ordered out of his family home and their lives, forever, when he told them he was gay. The students and I came to understand poignantly that even the homeless, bottom of the bottom, endure the same private and public rituals that mark each of us as members of this culture.

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It is tempting to suggest that my integration of teaching, research and community involvement evolved consciously and through effective planning -- It did not. The journey has taken many unexpected turns, and its route has been a product of reaction to experiences more than of forethought.

The homeless outreach program started involving students and then took on the legitimacy of a learning experience more by accident than design. Nonetheless, I firmly believe that the encounter with the lives of homeless, supported by classroom experience has been meaningful for

many students. As I developed these activities, I was aware of the barriers that have prevented service learning from becoming an integral part of the academic experience. Within the academy, especially in private colleges and universities, service learning often has been labeled "non academic". These activities have been denied the legitimacy accorded to classroom-based educational experiences accompanied by research papers, reading and critiquing the original text. It began to strike me as ironic that objections to experiential learning as lacking academic rigor could be mounted by those who support empirical research methods and natural science laboratories**.** The learning outcomes of the experience were manifest.

For the average student the street experience afforded the opportunity to face, one-on-one, people who otherwise would never become speaking acquaintances. They learned... the nature of the outsider, the person who lives beyond the margins of everyday life, that character that Georg Simmel termed "the stranger." By taking ideas of the classroom, interacting with personalities in the real world, and ultimately casting those experiences with a return to the classroom and academic writings, the students were provided with a unique opportunity to test social theory and methodology. Even though no student has become a tramp and the training of Rick could be challenged, his interaction and that of his colleagues from the street undoubtedly made my students much more aware of what being a tramp means to those who will live during the next few decades.

They learned not only about homelessness, but about the community politics which defined the lives of poverty and those of homeless people.

These encounters allowed them to better comprehend the power of the media as well as to test various constructed images of homelessness. Some students engaged in periodic battles with official community leaders who expressed the opinion that we were encouraging people to remain homeless by providing them food and support, and who believed that our activities would mold the City of Des Moines into a mecca for the downtrodden of America. A member of the City Council routinely criticized the Salvation Army program as "enabling" the homeless. As she commented on more than one occasion, "Leave them alone until they ask for help ... if they don't and freeze to death in the cold of winter ... it's their own fault for not asking for our help."

Students personally tested the notion constructed by police and media that "danger" lurks on the streets of the poorer parts of the community. The nightly news and the morning newspaper carried accounts of gang warfare, drive-by shootings, and communities held at bay by youthful bandits. When four or five hours later we were on those same streets, we would see no evidence of this warfare. Factually, during all the mornings that I took students onto the streets there was never once any threat of danger. Sure, periodically we encountered people selling everything from crack to themselves, but these situations posed us no threat. The media used many of the homeless persons whom the students knew to illustrate situations of danger, and lives of despair. Students who knew these people ably critiqued the false context and over-dramatized reports so common to local media.

With the passage of time several of these students went on to work in, and eventually administer, a variety of programs in the private and public sector.

Many of the social events that they observed on the street undoubtedly impacted their occupational decisions. The void of child care, for instance, was manifest in the communities we explored, and several students later worked to create ways to deliver child care to homeless families. Others students built on these experiences in the voluntarism that they pursued in their communities.

Several new community programs sprang in part or totally from the Sally homeless program. Unlike Athena, they did not spring full-blown from the head of Zeus, but instead came to fruition slowly as needs with the community were discovered. Several community volunteers who participated in the program saw the need for a "last resort" shelter, and became participants in forming Churches United Shelter, a facility that today serves over one-hundred residents each night and is the only free shelter in the city of Des Moines. Others were involved in development of Port of Entry, a housing program for substance abusing homeless men. It was through work on the Sally van, that workers became aware that many substance abusers cannot enter treatment directly from the street-- it is much too intimidating. Port of Entry serves as an entry point for substance abuse treatment of homeless men who are not ready to move into the formal system.

The course of my teaching, research and writing have been affected by all of these experiences, from the first efforts to count the homeless, the political responses to those efforts, the mornings on the street, and the interactions with my students as they processed their personal encounters with homelessness.

In recent years I have not gone to the streets often as part of the classroom experience. But I have attempted to bring, through my new courses, issues of Civil Society into focus in the classroom. It seems more

and more imperative to bring focus to the meaning and experience of community involvement and to have students understand their present and future roles in society.

My research on homelessness inevitably has evolved to focus on specific issues of poverty and homelessness. Most recently, I have been examining death and dying among homeless individuals and shelter workers. Efforts to understand responses to and events surrounding the death of Wolfman and others made us aware that research had ignored this important phenomenon. Thus, for two years student research assistants have helped interview the homeless, shelter staff, funeral home professionals, police, staff of local hospitals and others who have contact with the homeless at the time of their death. This resulted in a refereed article, co-authored with a student, titled "Dying Homeless but Not Alone." Work continues on this overlooked and ignored topic.

Most recently, reflection on all of the issues of which I have spoken this evening have brought me to focus my writing on applying sociology. This past year I co-authored an edited volume titled "Applying Sociology: Making a Better World." This winter, in a special issue of *The American Sociologist* (which is currently in press) focusing on humanistic sociology, my co-author Bill DuBois and I present an expansion of these ideas in our lead - article titled "What is Humanist Sociology." In this piece we present a history of the field as well as a synthesis and critique of this point of view.

In essence, tonight's presentation has come back to the root question of the meaning of my discipline. How do we make justice of the academy

and the real world within the context of modern teaching and scholarship. The time has come for the application of sociology to move back into the real world and conversely following a loop that then takes us to the academy and ... well, the loop never ends. At no time in the history of the academy has there been a greater opportunity to make a difference in the lives of so many people. The challenge is clear, but the pathway remains uncharted. It is this charting that offers to many of us the challenge as we hand our discipline to "the next generation."

Thank you for coming tonight, may the life of all of these people who have made a difference in my being have a similar impact on each of you as we ponder yesterday, today, and ultimately tomorrow.